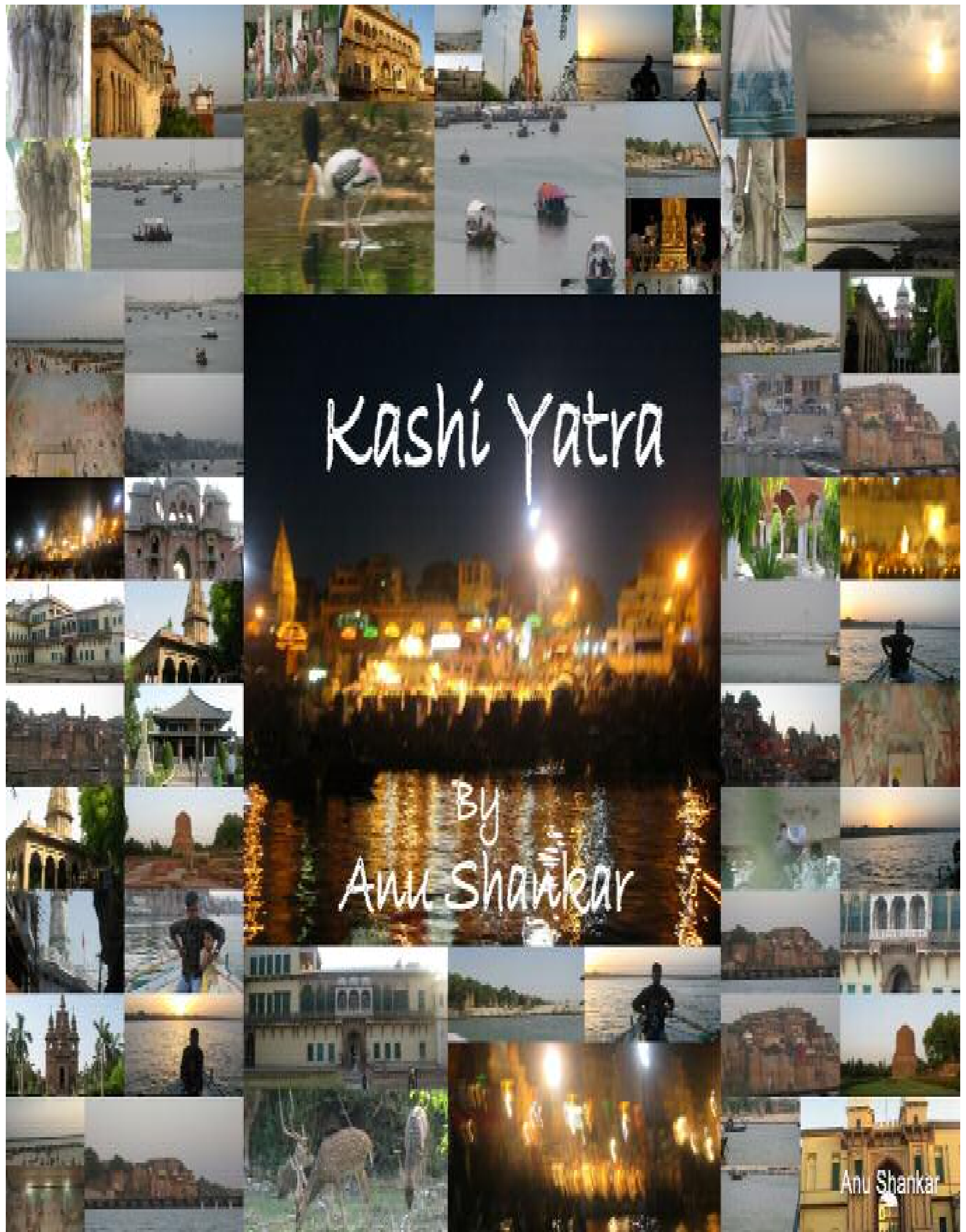

Kashi Yatra
By
Anu Shankar
Anu Shankar

Table of Contents

KASHI YATRA

Kashi Yatra- A pilgrimage to the holy city of Kashi, or Varanasi, as it is known today, is the dream of every devout Hindu.

There are many interpretations of the term 'Kashi Yatra'. To some, it simply means a visit to the holy city to bathe in the holy Ganges, have darshan of Lord Vishwanath, and perform the sacred rites to one's ancestors to satisfy them.

To most South Indians, the Kashi Yatra starts with a trip to Rameswaram, where one collects the sand at either Rameswaram, or more particularly, Dhanushkodi. This sand is then carried all the way to Kashi, or, if possible, the Triveni Sangam at Allahabad, and immersed at the confluence of the 3 holiest rivers- Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati. From here, water is collected, and after performing all the rites and pujas at Kashi, carried back to Rameswaram, and used to perform Abhishekam to the Lord there.

For north Indians, the trip, for obvious geographical reasons, is the opposite. They start the Yatra at Kashi, and bring the holy water to Rameswaram, from where they take the sand back for immersion in the Ganga.

We are South Indians, hailing from Ramanathapuram, and have been fortunate enough to have visited the holy temple at Rameswaram a number of times. On one of our trips, my in-laws brought back the holy sand on which lord Rama would have stepped ages ago. They had kept the sand carefully for a number of years, hoping to make the trip to Kashi at least once in their lifetime, and satisfy our forefathers. Fortune has finally smiled on us, and we have just returned from Kashi.

Though we took the train to Varanasi, the first place we visited was Allahabad, where we made a Shiva lingam with the sand from Rameswaram, performed the appropriate pujas, and finally immersed it in the Triveni Sangam. We have returned with the holy water from the confluence, and are waiting for the next trip to our home town and Rameswaram, so that we can complete our Kashi Yatra successfully.

Kashi is such an ancient city, with a culture and history unparalleled by any other, that one article is not enough to describe it. There is so much to see and so many places and temples to visit both in and around Kashi that I started a new blog to do justice to it. This book is a compilation of the blog for the convenience of those who would like to read it at their leisure.

How to Reach, Where to Stay and Where to Eat

In the days of my grandparents, going to Kashi was a dream, a journey which entailed days of travel by a rickety bus, and then, for the poor, a weary walk to the holy city, and for the affluent, a bullock cart ride. It is interesting to hear these stories, especially now that we don't have to undergo any hardships to reach this holy place. The pilgrimage is no longer an arduous trip, but an easy holiday.

The best way to reach Varanasi is, of course by Air. The airport is about 10Kms outside the city, and there are a number of flights from Delhi, and even Bombay.

Trains are also a good option. There are two major stations these days- Varanasi Junction and Kashi. Mughalsarai, 10 Kms away, is also extremely well connected. If you want to get a first hand experience of train travel in India, then make sure to take a II class ticket and travel from Mumbai to Varanasi by train. The experience will certainly be a unique one, and you will get ample time to study human nature – from single travelers to couples with a vast number of kids (and only one berth), the crowd getting in and out at every station, and of course, the vendors, selling every variety of food items possible. Of course, if you want to avoid all this and have a comfortable journey, book tickets in an AC coach. Things will certainly seem better.

Buses are also an option today, if you are coming from somewhere in UP or the nearby states. However, do not look for comforts, as they are not yet available.

By far, trains are certainly the most cost-efficient option.

Once you reach Varanasi, travel to your place of stay is not a very difficult process. The prepaid Auto stand outside the station is the best way to get to your destination without getting conned.

It is a good idea to plan your travel and book your place of stay beforehand. There are a large number of hotels and lodges in Varanasi, and choosing one is not an easy thing, especially when one is surrounded by a crowd of people including the auto/car driver and

ones' luggage. If you plan to stay at one of the high end hotels, book well in advance. All these hotels have their own website, and make reservations online.

If you are running on a modest budget, again the net is the best place for you to search. Phone numbers of many such hotels are available on the net. Check some of these out and make your bookings before you start.

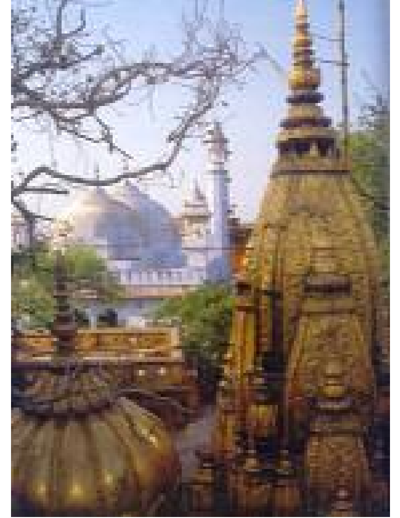
If you only have a shoestring budget, do not worry. Varanasi beckons to all, and makes arrangements for all, rich and poor alike. On each one of the 64 Ghats along the Ganga, there are only mutts, or Hindu monasteries, belonging to various sects. Each Ghat generally has mutts from different parts of India. For example, the Hanuman Ghat is lined with mutts belonging to south India, and hence, is mainly frequented by south Indians. At such places, the accommodation is usually basic but is a good place to stay if you are religious and are planning to perform the rites to ancestors etc. we stayed at the Kanchi Shankara Mutt, and except for the regular power cuts, it wasn't too bad, in fact, much better than we expected.

These days, many of the priests who perform the rituals here have realized that a number of visitors come to perform rituals, but at the same time, need the comforts they are used to at home. They are learning to make use of this need, and are rebuilding their homes, adding rooms for guests, who can stay there in comfort, AC and all, and perform all their rites and rituals in peace. A luxurious pilgrimage, in fact!!!!

Food is not a problem at Varanasi. If you stay at one of the Mutts, they will cook for you, and that too, typical home cooked food. Outside, hotels abound, and you can find every kind of cuisine. Try one for every meal, and you will have variety, if nothing else!

Wherever you go in Varanasi, the first thing you will notice is cows! Cows are never confined to cowsheds, and it is a belief that in this holy city, they will never butt anyone. With so many cows around, it is no wonder that milk and milk products are cheap and wholesome. We gorged on milk, buttermilk, lassi and cream all the 10 days that we were there. Do check them out!

THE KASHI VISHWANATH TEMPLE



Kashi is known as the land of Shiva. Everything in Kashi not only revolves around the main temple of Vishwanath, as Shiva is known here, but He is also believed to be in control of everything that happens in this holy city. Normally, in Hindu mythology, the nine planets, or Navagrahas, who govern our actions, are independent, and perform their duty without interference from the Gods (a case of not even God interfering with nature and her rules). However, Kashi is a special city, an exception to this rule, where Shiva even governs the Navagrahas. It is believed that Lord Shaneeshwara (Saturn) once came to catch Shiva for the period of 7 ½ years (what is commonly called Saade-saati), and found himself unable to enter the temple. He is believed to have stayed outside the temple, and hence the temple of Shaneeshwara outside the Vishwanath temple is much frequented by pilgrims who light oil lamps here, hoping to escape the clutch of Shani.

There are just too many legends to explain why Kashi is sacred, and why Shiva chose to reside here. I recently read an article where the writer explains in scientific terms, that in this area, the Ganges flows in a curve, in the northward direction. The curvature and the force of the river led to the formation of a natural amphitheatre, or natural steps in simpler terms. This probably attracted our forefathers to this place, who built Ghats where the steps had formed, to have a bath, and installed their patron deity, Shiva as the lord of this place. Therefore, in order to avoid the confusion, let us not discuss the legends and accept the fact that here, Shiva is called Vishwanath or Vishweshwar, the lord of the world.

Kashi or Benares has been ruled by various great kings, some distinguished ones, and some not so famous. It even passed through a phase of being ruled over by the Buddhists. But the ancient temples, which saw so many rulers come and go, could not survive the onslaught of the Mughals. The temples were destroyed, not once, but a number of times by various Mughal invaders, leaving no trace of what the original temples might have looked like.

The temple, as it stands today, owes its existence to the Queen of Indore, Rani AhilyaBai Holkar. It was she who, seeing the sorry state of affairs here, not only provided the funds, but also made all the arrangements for building the temple. She was certainly a great woman, much ahead of her time, who took up the task of restoring to their glory, many of the ancient temples of India, which had suffered at the hands of plundering monarchs. The temple of Somnath is another such temple. Among the other temples which she helped build are the ones at Dwaraka, Triambakeshwar, and Parali Vaidyanath.

The present temple stands beside a mosque that had been built by Aurangzeb over the ruins of the original temple. The sacred idol, the Shiva lingam, had been hidden in a well, hoping to prevent its destruction. This well, now known as the Gyaana Vapi (well of knowledge) stands in an area between the temple and the mosque. I have had the good fortune to visit Kashi twice-the first time as a 12 year old, and again recently, almost 20 years later. On my first visit, I remember seeing the well and being told its story when we were circumambulating the temple. This time however, there was some construction work going on (they are renovating the temple and the area around it), and we were unable to circumambulate the temple, and hence could not see the well.

Though Kashi is a place of great sanctity, it is also infamous for the Pandas, or a class of priests, who charge exorbitant amounts of money. If u talk to anyone who has visited Kashi, you will be sure to hear tales of how they have been overcharged and been taken for a ride by these people. The same goes for the temple too. However, the temple administration is now making efforts to remedy the situation. The first step it has taken in this direction is the creation of its own website. This site has been well organized, with complete details about the temple, as well as the pujas conducted, the timings of the different Aarthis, and the charges for the various offerings. Best of all, it is possible to book pujas on the net well in advance, and arrange whether you want the puja to be performed in your presence, in which case the ticket allows you an entry into the temple bypassing the long queue, or in your absence, in which case, the Prasad is sent to you by post. This is a good system, and must be appreciated. Of course, at this point of time, this doesn't entirely bypass the earlier system of paying money to the priests. These days, there are a number of people who book for the pujas, and one often gets relegated to the back row from where we can hardly get a glimpse of what

is going on. A little extra from your wallet goes a long way in getting you a prime position to watch the puja.

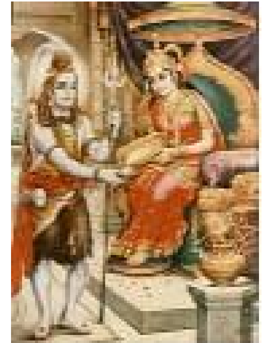
We attended 2 Aartis at the temple- the Saptharishi Aarthi in the evening, and the early morning Mangalaarti.

The Saptharishi Aarthi is the aarti performed by 7 priests, each belonging to a different Gotram, performing the aarti to the lingam simultaneously. It is believed that every evening, the Saptarishis, the seven great sages come to perform aarti to the lord, and hence this puja is conducted every evening at 7 PM. This is followed by the Shringar Aarthi and finally the Shayan Aarti, when the Lord is put to sleep. We attended only the saptarishis aarthi, but if you do, pay for the Shringar Aarti and stay for the Shayan aarti as well, which is free. Seeing these Aartis is an experience which must not be missed. We were absolutely spellbound seeing the way in which they decorated the Shiva lingam, but I have no words to describe the atmosphere during the final aarthi, which was simply divine, to say the least!

The early morning Mangalaarti, where the Lord is woken up is at 3AM every morning. It is, no doubt, not an easy thing to be up and ready at the temple by 2:45AM, especially on a holiday, but this is one puja which is worth the effort! First, we get to see the Lord, as he was during the night (Nirmalya Darshan). Then, all the garlands and flowers are removed, and we get to see the original lingam in all its majesty (again, not an easy thing to see, as it is usually covered with flowers, water and bilva leaves). Then, Abhishekam is performed to the lingam followed by decoration with flowers. Again, this decoration is removed, and we get the Prasad, and finally each and everyone present is allowed to go near the lingam and offer prayers. This can be done in peace as the temple doors are not yet opened to the public. We spent about 20 minutes thus in seclusion with the lord we had come to see from so far…….

There is one more Aarthi in the afternoon, called the Bhog Aarthi. We did not attend that, and am unable to give any details about it. For more information about Aarthis and booking, visit the temple website at http://www.shrikashivishwanath.org/

THE ANNAPURNA TEMPLE



Food is one of the basic necessities of life, and it is no wonder that we say '*Annam Brahma'*, food is God. It is the mother who provides food for the child, and it is again no wonder that we pray to the goddess Parvati as Annapurna, the one who gives us food. It is believed that Parvati gave Alms to Shiva, and she is depicted with a bowl in one hand and ladle in the other, serving food to Shiva, standing in front of her, with his begging bowl in His hand. The most popular temple of Annapurna is at Kashi followed by the one at Horanadu, in Karnataka. There are two other temples of Annapurna, one in Kerala, and one in Gujarat.

The temple of Annapurna at Kashi is right next to the Vishwanath temple. This temple is attached to the Annapurna Mutt. A highlight of this temple is that every year, the day before Diwali, a golden idol of Annapurna is opened for darshan. This idol can be seen only on that one day, and it is indeed a great sight! Annapurna sits in the middle with her trademark bowl and ladle. On her left is Lakshmi (Sridevi- the goddess of wealth) and on her right is Bhudevi (the goddess of the earth). All these idols are of pure Gold, and are beautiful to look at. In front of them stands Shiva, made of silver, asking for alms. I was fortunate enough to visit Kashi during Diwali when I was a child, and the image of the Golden Annapurna is etched on my mind. It is a great wish of mine to go back once more and feast my eyes on that wonderful sight, but that is in Her hands alone!

In the sanctum of the temple, the idol of the goddess is a small one, which is always decorated in a sari when open for darshan. A silver mask covers her face, and little else can be seen. All the idols of Annapurna available show her in a sitting position, and we naturally assumed that that was how she was in this temple. However, we were in for a pleasant surprise. We had arranged for Abhishekam at the temple, and were allowed into the sanctum to perform the Abhishekam ourselves. It was then that we realized that the idol of Annapurna is made of black stone, quite small, and she is in the standing position. The image is simple, holding only the bowl and ladle, with practically no decorations at all. But goodness, she is so beautiful! The smile on her face is so charming, so real, it almost seems She is standing in front of us!

For the information of devotees who would like to perform the Abhishekam, tickets are available at the temple office for Rs.750/-. This amount is subject to change, and it would be better if one made enquiries at the temple office. The mutt and the local priests there have come to some sort of an arrangement where the Guruji of the mutt performs the puja on certain days and on certain days, the puja is performed by the local priests. There is a board put up outside the main sanctum informing people about who is performing the puja that day. The day the mutt is in charge, it is a simple matter to pay money at the office and arrange for the Abhishekam. On the other days, the amount is subject to the number of people wanting to perform the Abhishekam and the amount they are willing to pay! Please check details in advance so that you can be prepared. The Abhishekam is performed at 10:30AM every morning, but there again, there is an inevitable delay, so be patient, and you will be rewarded. It is worth a wait!

Another specialty of this temple is that food is served to all devotees….food is too simple a term for what is virtually a feast. Free coupons are available at the temple office and the food is served in a hall behind the temple. It is believed that the goddess takes her food only after making sure that all her devotees have had their fill. Try to partake of this Prasad at least once during your stay in Kashi. It is also a tradition to perform some service before taking food here. So many devotees take their turn in serving a few devotees before starting to eat. This was a wonderful experience in itself, and a practice that must be encouraged.

You can contact the temple authorities at the following numbers: (0542) 2402253, 2392619.

THE TEMPLE CIRCUIT

The Vishwanath and Annapurna temples are the most popular and famous temples in Kashi, and the main reasons for a visit. However, our ancient texts mention a few more temples which are important and must be visited to complete the circuit of temples.

THE DHUNDI GANAPATHY TEMPLE

Traditionally, the temple circuit begins with a visit to the Dhundi Ganapathy temple. This temple is on the way to the Vishwanath temple, is a small temple, looking like one on the roadside, but is actually one of the important ones. We can pay our respects to Ganesha while standing in the queue to enter the Vishwanath temple.

THE VISALAKSHI TEMPLE

Visalakshi is the second consort of Shiva in this holy city of Kashi. This temple is one among the 52 Shakti peethams, and is part of the famous triad of temples- Kanchi Kamakshi, Madurai Meenakshi and Kashi Visalakshi. This small temple is situated in one of the narrow lanes around the Vishwanath temple, and it is mainly south Indians who seek out this temple.

Though the temple is quite small, the idol of the goddess is very beautiful. Behind the main stone idol of the goddess is another idol (some say it is a silver casting, others say it is an idol), believed to be the idol prayed to in ancient times. One of our guides told us that it was the swayambhu idol of the goddess, while another refuted this claim. Whatever it is, it is certainly worth a look, so remember to look behind the idol when you visit the temple.

Adi Shankaracharya, when he visited the temple, performed prayers to renew the powers of the temple and the goddess which had borne the brunt of several invasions. He also installed a Sri Yantram there, and it is to this Yantram that puja is done. Kumkumarchana to this Sri Yantram is considered very special, and can be performed by asking the pujari there.

THE KALA BHAIRAV TEMPLE

Kala Bhairav is the guardian deity of Kashi. He occupies the position of a guard/ watchman with a dog as his vehicle, and is regarded as one of the forms of Shiva himself. In Kashi, there are 8 Bhairav temples, collectively called Ashta Bhairav. These are - Kala Bhairav, Dhandapani, Veera Bhairav, Batuk Bhairav, Aashu Bhairav, Aananda Bhairav, Rudra Bhairav and Ruru Bhairav. We visited only the first two temples, as our guide had no idea where the other temples were.

Among these, Kala Bhairav is the most important one, visited by all those who visit Kashi. Dhandapani, or the one who wields a stick, is the one who decides on the punishment, while Kala Bhairav is the one who enforces his decision. In the words of our guide, Dhandapani is the commissioner, while Kala Bhairav is the constable. As usual, it is the constable who is more feared, than the commissioner himself!

I remember visiting the Kala Bhairav temple on my earlier visit. Seen through the eyes of a 12 year old imaginative girl, the temple had an eerie atmosphere, was practically empty, and rather scary I couldn't get out of the temple soon enough! No wonder then that this memory has stuck for more than 20 years. It was with some slight trepidation that I visited the temple this time, only to have my memories trashed in a moment. The temple had no atmosphere, scary or otherwise. Just like any other temple, with the pandas desperately trying to squeeze money out of us...........

The specialty of this temple is the sacred thread available there. These threads, known as Kashi threads, are supposed to ward off evil forces, and are in great demand.

THE BINDU MADHAVA TEMPLE

Among the ancient temples in the must-visit list of Kashi temples is the Bindu Madhava Temple. This temple is also one of a trinity- Veni Madhava at Sangam in Allahabad,

Bindu Madhava at Kashi and Sethu Madhava at Rameswaram. All these three temples are small, simple affairs, with similar idols which are rather small in size.

The Bindu Madhava Temple is best approached from the Panchaganga Ghat. There is, of course a road, but one which is rarely used by the pilgrims. The original temple was apparently a big and important one, but was destroyed by Aurangzeb, who (as usual) built a mosque over it. The mosque stands proudly till date, though a couple of turrets have fallen recently, while the new temple is a small one, practically invisible until we reach it.

THE CHOZHI MATA TEMPLE

A visit to Kashi is incomplete without a visit to the Chozhi Mata Temple. This temple is known by various names such as Chozhi or Cowrie Mata, and Gauri Mata temple, and the name owes its origin to the cowries or shells which are thrown to the goddess as offering. The goddess her is considered to be a sister of Shiva.

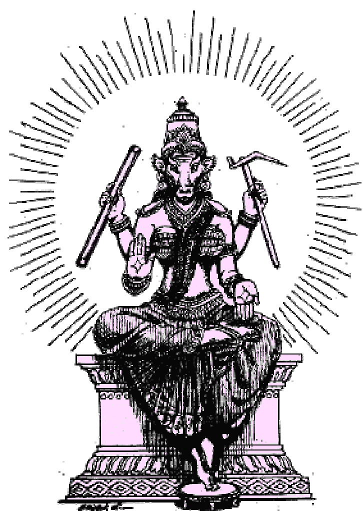
According to legend, Shiva sister had her temple within the ancient temple complex. However, when she saw thousands of common people touch and hug her brother while praying, she became jealous and tried to stop this practice. At this, Shiva became angry. “He was at Kashi so that the common people could pray to him the way they liked” He said, and as punishment, banished her, and sent her out of the temple. She repented and prayed to Shiva for mercy, and finally he relented. He could not take back the curse, but He decreed that al those who visit Kashi should visit her too. A trip to Kashi would be ineffective if one returned without visiting her. Hence it is a practice to visit the Chozhi Mata Temple after visiting all the temples in Kashi and performing all rituals. One can buy cowries outside the temple, throw a few on the goddess and ask her to bless them by bestowing on them the fruits of their Kashi Yatra, and bring back a few cowries as Prasad.

This temple is en-route to BHU and is quite easy to find, as it is frequented by quite a large crowd at all times. Do visit this temple and make your Yatra a success!

OTHER ANCIENT TEMPLES IN KASHI

Kashi is a place of pilgrimage and people come here to visit temples. It is therefore no wonder that wherever you turn, you come across a temple. Some are ancient, some recent, and the others fall somewhere in between. Some are architecturally beautiful; some have an interesting history, while the others attract you simply for their sanctity. It is practically impossible to make a complete list of the temples in Kashi, and I will not even try to make that attempt. I will, therefore stick to describing the temples I have visited, and the temples I have heard of, but could not visit.

THE VARAHI TEMPLE



Varahi is considered to be one of the Saptha Matas or seven forms of the Divine Mother. She is the Shakti (Power) of Vishnu when He took the form of a Boar (Varaha) to kill the demon Hiranyaksha and save the Earth.

The Varahi temple is on the Tripura Bhairavi Ghat, and is within walking distance from the Vishwanath Temple. I had never heard of this temple, and visiting this temple threw up a couple of surprises. The first was that the temple is open only from 5AM to 7AM!!! The prayers to the Devi are completed and the doors tightly shut before the first rays of the sun can fall on them. Much as we tried, we couldn't get a satisfactory reason for this out of the only person who was present there. If any of you have any more light to throw on this, you are welcome. Please add your comments at the bottom of this post.

The second surprise was the idol of the goddess itself. The idol is in the basement, and only the priest goes down the steps to bathe and decorate the idol. All other devotees have to peep through a hole in the (basement) roof to have darshan of the goddess who, to put it simply, is huge!! There are 2 holes- one to have darshan of the face, and another of the feet. The goddess has a reputation for being very powerful, and it is believed that when a priest kept chanting the wrong mantras, she swallowed him up whole!

Though open for only 2 hours in a day, the temple is remarkably well kept. The temple is not for sleepy heads who like their holidays to be relaxed. It is a good idea to attend the early morning Mangalaarti at the Vishwanath temple, and then visit this temple before returning home. This is what we did, and returned completely satisfied. Make sure you are accompanied by a guide or someone who knows the roads, as the narrow lanes are completely deserted at this time of the morning, and it is easy to get lost in the winding lanes of the city. I was accompanied by my son, my husband and mother-in-law, besides the guide, and in spite of that, I and my son managed to lose our way and spent a scary 10 minutes till they found us again!

So go ahead, get up early and visit this temple. It's worth the effort!

THE KEDARESHWAR TEMPLE

The Kedareshwar temple on Kedar Ghat is one of the few temples which have withstood attacks by the Mughals. Probably they did not consider the temple important enough! Whatever the reason, this temple, situated right on the banks of the Ganga on the Kedar Ghat stands tall and proud till date. A visit to this temple is believed to give one the fruits of a visit to the great temple at Kedarnath, and is always filled with pilgrims.

THE CHINTAMANI GANAPATHY TEMPLE

The Chintamani Ganapathy temple is very near the Kedareshwar temple, and is another important temple of lord Ganesh.

THE SAKSHI VINAYAKA TEMPLE

The Sakshi vinayaka temple is very near the gate no.1 of the Vishwanath temple. Though the idol is huge, there is no temple to speak of. It looks like a simple roadside temple, but in reality, it is this Ganesh who is considered Sakshi or witness of the Panch Kosi Parikrama, or the 5 mile circumambulation of the temples in Kashi.

THE DURGA TEMPLE

The Durga temple, next to the Durga Kund is also an ancient temple and is also known as the monkey temple because of the multitude of monkeys around.

We were unable to visit the following temples on my list. We wanted to, especially since we had heard a lot about them, but time was a major consideration, followed by our giving priority to the rituals more than the temples. I hope we shall get another chance to visit these temples. Meanwhile, I am mentioning the names of the temples and their importance so that at least my readers can visit them!

THE TILABHANDESHWARA TEMPLE

This temple is among the older ones in Kashi, with one of the largest lingams in the city. It is believed that the lingam grows the size of a sesame (Til) seed every day and hence the name. The temple is situated near the Bengali Tola Intermediate College. We were unable to see this temple, but I recommend visitors to visit the temple and mail me their opinion.

THE MANIKARNIKESHWARA TEMPLE

The Manikarnika Ghat is one of the most sacred Ghats on the Ganges, and is believed to be earliest. On this Ghat stands the Manikarnikeshwara temple, where one has to climb down two storeys under the ground to reach the sanctum, which is believed to be at the same level as the bed of the Ganges. This temple is said to be among the oldest here, but we were unable to find anyone to accompany is down to the temple. I had read about this temple on the website of Outlook Traveller, and wanted to visit it, but our guide claimed that no one visited the temple anyway, and hence it wasn't safe to do so….well, so there's another temple that I want to visit someday!

Saints of Varanasi

Sant Tulsidas

The great Saint Tulsidas has a close connection with Varanasi. It was in this holy city that he was blessed by Hanuman and by his grace had darshan of his chosen deity, Sri Ram. This place is now revered as the **Sankat Mochan Hanuman Mandir**. This temple is situated near the Benares Hindu University, and is a much frequented place of worship.

The **Tulsi Manas Mandir** is a comparatively recent temple which has the entire Ram Charit Manas written by Tulsidas inscribed on its walls.

Sant Tulsidas left his mortal coil to merge with his beloved Ram on the banks of the Ganga near Asi Ghat. A new Ghat, named after him as Tulsi Ghat has been built there.

Kabir

Sant Tulsidas came to Varanasi to spend the last few years of his life in this holy city, while the great saint Kabir, revered alike by Hindus and Muslims spent the major part of his life here in Varanasi before moving on to other places….

Kabir was found on a lotus in a lake by his foster parents, the weavers Niru and Nima. This lake, known as Laher Talav is in the heart of Varanasi city, very near the railway station. Here, a big hall has been built by some of his followers, and is used for religious discourses. Grand plans are underway to build a big temple cum ashram commemorating the great saint, which will be ready in about 2 to 3 years.



The place where Kabir lived with his parents, his home is no more….but at that place is the Kabir Mutt, where his followers have built a beautiful ashram to keep his memories as well as his beliefs alive. Kabir attained Samadhi at Maghar near Gorakhpur. There was a dispute among the Hindus and Muslims regarding what should be done with the body- whether

it should be cremated or buried. Resolving to share his body, when they opened the cloth covering him, all they found were flowers! The two groups distributed the flowers amongst themselves, and his samadhis stand there till date- both of them, side by side, one built by the Hindus and the other by the Muslims. Some of those flowers were brought back to Varanasi by one of his devotees, and a Samadhi has been built here in the mutt.

There are two temples in the ashram- the Samadhi Mandir and the Bijak Mandir. According to Wikipedia, "**Bijak** is the best known of the compilations of the compositions of Kabir, and as such is the Holy Scripture for followers of the Kabirpanthi religion.

The Bijak is one of the earliest of the major texts in modern Hindi. The term Bijak is derived from Bija, meaning a document containing sacred texts". In this temple, some of the things used by Kabir have been preserved, and some of his quotations are being inscribed on the walls.



Just behind this mutt is the original house where Kabir is believed to have lives, of course, nothing remains of the original house and a row of rooms serving as a dharamshala have been built there. Here are the samadhis of his foster parents, Niru and Nima. Some interesting things came to light when the dharamshala was being built. When the ground was dug, two statues were found buried- one, an image of Lakshmi Narayana, an incredibly beautiful image with Vishnu holding the Conch, Chakra, Gadha and Lotus flower, and Lakshmi smiling in bliss.. The second statue is that of a beheaded man, his hands and feet in chains. This is believed to be a statue of the 9th Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, who was tortured and beheaded while in manacles by Aurangzeb. No one knows why these statues were here, but they are an interesting find…..

The Kabir mutt is an interesting place, with the peace and sanctity one associates with Kabir. This is a place children will enjoy too, as there is lots of place to run around, and lots to see. A number of statues have been made, showing instances from Kabir's life. These, and paintings, also depicting his life and ideas, are something not just adults, but kids will also enjoy.

The Ganga- Then and Now

A Boat Ride Down the Ganges- A Tour of the Ghats and the Ganga Aarti

Row, row, row the boat
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, Merrily, Merrily,
Life is but a dream……….

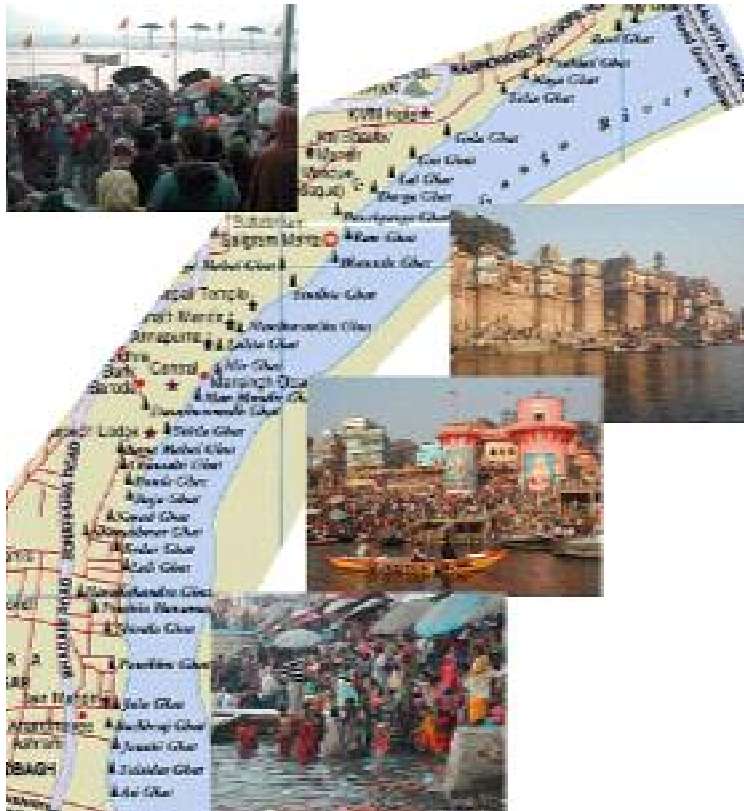
This is one of my son's favourite rhymes, and it describes exactly our experience during a boat ride on the Ganges.

We spent 10 days in Varanasi, and not a day passed without us taking a boat ride. My husband Shankar made friends with a young boatman named Raju, not yet out of his teens, and we found him waiting for us, ready to take us to the other bank for a bath, or a long, leisurely boat ride down the river. It was he who took us for a tour along all the Ghats, a trip to the Ramnagar Palace, and also to the temples via the Ghats. It was a wonderful experience, one I shall never forget.

It is impossible for me to give a detailed account of all the Ghats. There are 64 of them, and more are being built. Each has a history and story of its own, and it will take pages to describe them. Here, I shall make an attempt to describe the Ghats which caught my attention.

To begin with, the **Asi Ghat** is where the Asi river merges with the Ganga, this is the southern extreme of the city. Just next to this is the **Tulsi Ghat** where Tulsidas breathed his last. As we move upward, we come to the **Hanuman Ghat**, which is where we stayed. Here is an ancient temple of Hanuman, and hence the name. Next to this is the **Karnataka state Ghat**, where there is a palace built by the Maharaja of Mysore. These two Ghats are full of mutts and ashrams belonging to south India, and hence is full of south Indians at any time of the year. Next comes the **Harishchandra Ghat**, which is the place associated with the legend of the truthful king, Harishchandra, and the trials and tribulations he underwent. This is one

of the burning Ghats of the city, where bodies of people of all castes and communities are consigned to flames.



Further upstream is the **Kedar Ghat**, with the Kedareshwar temple, followed by the **Kshameshwar Ghat** and then the **Narad Ghat**. The Narad Ghat, incidentally, is the only Ghat on which people don't bathe. In mythology, Narada is depicted as the naughty saint who always creates trouble (with the best motives of course!), and it is believed that a couple bathing on this Ghat will start fighting amongst themselves!

The **Raja Ghat** is one belonging to the royal family of Varanasi, while the **Shitala Ghat** has a temple of Shitala Devi, who is prayed to, to avoid the pox. The **Rana Mahal Ghat** was built by Maharana Pratap, and is a fine example of Rajasthani architecture, as is the **Maan Mandir Ghat** further up, attributed to Man Singh, which also has an observatory on top. The **Lalitha Ghat** is the one nearest to the Vishwanath and Annapurna temples. Next is the famous **Manikarnika Ghat**, where Parvati is believed to have dropped her ear rings. This is also a burning Ghat, where funeral pyres burn day and night, every single day. It is believed that there is always a pyre burning on this Ghat, at any time of the day or night. Till about 100 years back, the ashes of a pyre burning at midnight would be taken to the Vishwanath temple for the lingam for Abhishekam, but this practice has now been stopped. The fortune of being cremated at this Ghat is solely reserved for Hindus.

Further up, we come to the **Bhosale Ghat**, built by the Bhonsales of Maharashtra. Then we come to the Panchaganga Ghat, which is among the more important ones. Here, it is believed, 5 different rivers merge, and when the river is in full force during the monsoon, the currents of the 5 rivers can be seen. On this Ghat are the Bindu Madhava Temple, and the mosque built by Aurangzeb after he demolished the original temple. The last of all the Ghats is the **Varuna Ghat** where the river Varuna merges with the Ganga.

It is sheer pleasure to go for a boat ride in the evening on the Ganges. Please take a simple row boat. There are motor boats too nowadays, but the pleasure the Ganga is waiting to give you can not be experienced in a fast boat.



We had a wonderful time on the river. Time stood still, and even my boisterous son seemed to realize that this was something special. We watched the colours of the water change as the sun set over the horizon, we saw birds returning back to their nests after a days work, we noticed how adept the seagulls and kingfishers were at catching fish, we even saw a couple of cormorants (snake darters) hover over the surface of the water and catch their prey. But what I shall remember is the sight of the bats as it grew dark. They swooped down, looking like oversized crows, and so perfectly caught fish in the dark. It was a sight I shall never forget. The beauty of nature is not as apparent in the landscape as it is in the life that makes up the landscape.



The climax of this wonderful boat ride on the Ganges is the Ganga aarti. The aarti is performed every evening at 7 PM on the main Ghats of the river, the most prominent being on the Dashashwamedha Ghat. The chants and the singing of the aarti songs created a wonderful atmosphere and the river and Ghats are full of people taking in this wonderful sight. While the priests perform the traditional aarti to the river, laymen and women like us light up earthen lamps and gently let them down into the river, where they float down like glittering jewels. It is a sight that has to be seen to be believed, and it is certainly an uplifting experience.

When we returned back home after this exhilarating evening on the Ganga, all was dark and calm. The river though was as serene and peaceful as ever, and I envied the boatmen who slept in their boats on the river all night. True, blessed are the boatmen who spend their life on this holy river!

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

What's Varanasi without the Ganga? The river is the lifeline of the city. The city revolves around the river with everyone coming there to have a dip. With its source in the Himalayas, the Ganges never dries up. Of course, with the kind of pollution that we are creating, and the kind of garbage that is put into the river, only the lord knows if this will last!

In May, it was extremely hot, and there wasn't too much water in the Ganges. We had to climb down 73 steps on the Hanuman Ghat to reach the water. Each step was so high, climbing back up was an exercise in itself. If I lived in Varanasi, I would never put on weight! I expected quite a crowd on the Ghats, as it was vacation time, but I was surprised to find the place quite empty. Going by my recollection of the Dashawamedh Ghat during Diwali 20 years back, this time the place was completely deserted! Of course it was a boon for us. I remember, the Ghats were so dirty in those days, even my grandfather, who is generally extremely religious had his qualms about bathing in the river. We compromised by having the first ritual bath on the Ghats and then going to the other side by boat whenever we wanted to bathe. This time, my visit was full of surprises. First of all, the crowd being so thin was in itself a surprise. The next thing was the comparative cleanliness of the river and the Ghats.

Those of you who have recently been to Kashi or seen photographs of the garbage there please don't rush to chide me! Of course, the river and the Ghats are dirty! But to understand what I mean, you should have seen what I saw 20 years back at the same place – every inch of the Ghat covered with people- people bathing, washing their clothes, urinating- doing anything and everything they could think of to the river they considered the most sacred of all- their Ganga Maiyya (mother)! That's not all! I remember having a dip in the river and coming up, the first thing I saw was a body floating towards me! I don't remember screaming, but it is a sight that recurred in my nightmares for months, and which is the first sight that comes to my mind when I think of Kashi.

Things are a lot better now. The Ghats are scrupulously cleaned every day- the minor ones by people with brooms and buckets of water, the important and crowded ones by jets of water. It is a sight that brigs a cheer to one's heart. When we were there, we even saw a group of NCC cadets who had come on a Clean Ganga campaign. Dead bodies are no longer

immersed in the river half burnt. Authorities are posted on the burning Ghats to make sure that the bodies are burnt completely.

In spite of this, the sight of the Ghats on the Ganges is not a pleasant one. I believe that this has nothing to do with the authorities, but with the people themselves. People worship the Ganges as their mother, but don't think twice before defiling her by throwing plastic bags in her and using soap when there are notices put up all over, urging people not to do so. Nothing will change until the mentality of people changes, and that is going to be a slow process.

When we were performing all the rites and rituals, it struck me that in those ancient days, when people prayed to the Ganga and offered so many things to her, all those things were biodegradable. All the containers were made of leaves, and the offerings were easily soluble, or were eaten by the fishes. Today, everyone comes here to perform the same rituals, but everyone takes a shortcut by using plastic and non degradable substances. Wherever we went on the other bank of the Ganga we saw dead fishes lying around. It was a sad sight.

People are more environment friendly today than ever before, and this is what gives me hope. It is my sincere request to all of you who read this article and visit Kashi to keep these things in mind, and avoid polluting the river in any way that you can. Let's do our bit for the environment and for this wonderful river. It might not be much, but it will be a beginning if each one of us does our bit………….





THE RAMNAGAR FORT AND PALACE

Kashi might be the abode of the gods, but it also been ruled by various kings, who left their imprint on the city. The Raja Ghat on the river, for example, was built by one of them, and history tells us that one of the kings actually jumped from one of its high turrets while trying to escape the British troops during the mutiny, and actually succeeded!



The last remnant memory of the kings of Benares is the Ramnagar Fort and Palace on the opposite banks of the Ganga, in a section of which the present scion of the royal family still resides. The palace is about 15Kms away by road, and an auto takes about half an hour to reach there. We however chose the longer, but more interesting and relaxing option- that of taking a row boat to the palace across the river. The journey took us a good one and a half hours, but the sheer bliss we experienced made every minute worth it!

The palace has now been converted into a museum, which closes around 4:30PM. If you want to have a leisurely stroll among the various antiquities displayed, make sure you keep at least 2 hours for the palace alone.

The first section of the museum has various vintage cars belonging to the royal family. After this, we are led back in time thanks to the impressive collection of howdahs and palanquins made of silver and ivory. It is indeed wonderful to see such magnificence, and one wonders what things would have been like when the kings were at the height of their glory. The next section comprises entirely of weapons, something my son enjoyed thoroughly. He is just 5 years old, and doesn't really relate to vintage cars and palanquins, but weapons – swords, shields and guns- these are things he certainly finds fascinating! We had the same experience at Akkalkot, and I still wonder why men have always been fascinated by weapons and killing. It is rare to find a fort or palace museum without a display of weapons. One can understand that kings in those days spent most of their time fighting, but to think that they took more care to store and preserve weapons more than other things like written records, for instance, is something that I am unable to digest.

Anyway, coming back to the museum, the portions I found most interesting were those which displayed beautiful works of art, and gifts from kings of other states. These were truly worth seeing, considering that with the great advances in science and technology, it is impossible to come across such wonderful handwork. Carvings on ivories, brass and bronze, tapestries from various regions of ancient India… The list goes on and on and on………

The section containing the ancient clothes of the kings, priceless collections from their wardrobe, don't look so priceless any more. Most of them are moth eaten, and deserve much more care than they are given at present. The section containing portraits of the rulers is good though, and a must-see for al history buffs

The pride of the museum is an ancient clock which displays not only the year, month, week, and day, but also astronomical facts about the sun, moon and constellations of stars! The fact that this clock is working till date is impressive in itself, and makes a visit to the museum worthwhile.

The name 'Ramnagar' is believed to be to have been given by the kings of Benares, when they decided to build their fort at this place. In ancient times, it was known as Vyasa Kashi, because the great Sage Vyasa (of Mahabharata fame) is believed to have lived here. According to the legend, Vyasa once incurred the wrath of Lord Shiva, who exiled him from Kashi. Vyasa chose to reside on the opposite bank of the Ganga, from where he could at least see the holy city. Thus this place came to known after him as Vyasa Kashi.

A tunnel-like passage from the quadrangle of the fort leads us under the fort to the river, on the banks of which is a temple known as the Vyasa temple. This temple has 3 lingams representing Vyasa, his son, Suka and Kashi Vishwanath. There is nothing much one can say about the temple, except that its location is absolutely wonderful. On one side is the Ganga, flowing in full force and on the other side are the high walls of the palace. The view is breathtaking, and as for the wind, I have no words to describe it! We felt like spending the rest of the evening there, but were shooed away by the watchman who wanted to lock up the place. Try to reach there early in the evening, so that you can spend at least an hour sitting on the walls of the fort, enjoying the lovely view and breathing in the fresh air. I can assure you that it will be a wonderful experience.

EXCURSIONS

SARNATH

Varanasi may be home to the most popular and ancient Hindu temples, but it also has the distinction of being one of the most sacred destinations for Buddhists too. Sarnath, about 20 Kms from Varanasi, is where the Buddha taught his first few disciples. This sacred place, which Emperor Ashoka tried to immortalize by building the greatest Stupa, fell to ruins like many Hindu temples in the vicinity. However, archaeological excavations have unearthed what is left of them, and efforts are on to not only preserve the remnants, but also to find out more details about them. Credit must certainly be given to the Buddhist Society, because of whom this site has been preserved as much as possible.

Sarnath is easily approachable from Varanasi. An auto-wala charges about Rs.150/- for the trip (to and fro). A number of people hanging around act as guides, though a guide is not really necessary. All the structures have detailed descriptions and explanations on boards. All you need is the patience to read them! The guides are useful, though, if you want to see the temples constructed around recently.

Buddha was born at Lumbini, now in Nepal, and attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. It was here he came next, to impart his teachings to his first 5 followers. It is believed that Emperor Ashoka constructed the Stupa at the exact place where the Buddha sat. The Dhamek Stupa is the only structure left standing in the entire area. It is 28m in diameter at the base and 43.6m in height, built partly of stone and partly of brick. There are intricate carvings on the lower portion of the Stupa.



The Stupa and the ruins of the ancient temples are protected monuments and one has to pay a minimal amount to view them. They are maintained by the archaeological society in association with the Buddhist society. The grounds of this enclosure are huge, and each

ruin has detailed descriptions of the nature of the original structure and its history. It is a good pace to take children. Though they understand nothing much of history, unlike most places around Varanasi, here they have ample place to run around and enjoy themselves. Samhith had a good time here, and he was actually curious about what the broken down structures were. It is probably a better idea to bring children to such places to teach them history, rather than spending time poring over boring books!

It is here that the original of the Ashoka pillar was found with the distinctive emblem of the four lions, which is now preserved in the museum. The museum, I have heard is very good, and worth a visit. However, the down side is that is open only from 10AM to 4:30PM, and we were unable to visit it.



The most recent structure here is the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara. The original Mulagandha Kuti temple lies among the brick ruins. This recent temple was built by the Sri Lankan Buddhist Monk, Anagarika Dharmapala, who founded the Maha Bodhi society. The story goes that he came on a pilgrimage to India, to visit the most sacred places in the life of Buddha, and he was appalled by the condition of the shrines at Sarnath. He had this temple constructed as a place of worship for Buddhists who came here from all over the world. He also collected some of the bones of the Buddha and had them kept in a casket in the temple. Over this casket is placed a beautiful image of the Buddha, made in stone, but covered with gold. On the walls are paintings depicting incidents from Buddha's life, painted by the renowned Japanese painter, Kosetsu Nosu**.** He also brought a cutting from the Bodhi tree at Sri Lanka (which in turn was grown from a cutting of the original tree at Gaya), which he planted in an enclosure near the temple. Around this tree are kept statues of the first five disciples of the Buddha as well as statues of the earlier Bodhisattvas. There is also a complete script of the first discourse of Buddha, in various languages.

One thing which I appreciated about this place was the serenity that was maintained in spite of the crowd visiting it. This probably has something to do with the atmosphere of the place itself, and which is probably why the Buddha chose this particular place for his first sermon. One thing to appreciate about the society is that one is allowed to click photos inside the temple. There is no ticket for cameras, but there is a placard telling us to put Rs.10/- per camera in the donation box. There is no one to actually make sure that one does put the money in. it is left to one's conscience to do the right thing, and probably what the Buddha would have expected us to do. It is a good system that seems to work here, and will probably work in other places too.

Once upon a time, when the Buddha came here, this was a forest with a number of deer, whom the Buddha was specially attracted to. In his forms as the Bodhisattva, He had frequently taken the form of a deer. The name 'Sarnath' is believed to come from the word 'Saranga-nath', or the Lord of the Deer, as the Buddha was known here. In recent times, till about 20 years back, there was a deer park here. This park has now given way to a small zoo with birds like parrots, parakeets and peacocks, and water birds like the pelicans and storks, and also a few crocodiles. There are quite a few deer around too. This mini zoo was something Samhith enjoyed thoroughly. We did not see any crocs, though we did see the deer and the water birds.



The constant influx of Buddhists from all over the world has led to the construction of new Buddhist temples. Among these is the impressive sandalwood temple built by the Japanese. This temple is built using sandalwood (so our guide told us). Inside is a life size statue of the Buddha in the pose in which he breathed his last. There are also statues of his first disciples, each made of a single block of sandalwood. The carvings and the decoration of the temple are beautiful, and make a visit to this temple worthwhile. When we visited, a form of aarti or prayer was in session with people singing and beating cymbals. Though I couldn't understand a word, the music was soothing, and I could have stood there for ages listening to it, if it wasn't for my boisterous son, who was running around, distracting people.

I had thought that was the end of my Sarnath trip, but it wasn't to be. As I have mentioned earlier, the name 'Sarnath' is believed to come from 'Saranga-nath' or Lord of the Deer, referring to the Buddha. However, our guide had a different take on it. He took us to a small temple near the Japanese one, where there were two lingams in the sanctum. Here, he said the two lingams represented Shiva and his brother-in-law (Sati's brother and Daksha's son) whose name was 'Sarangnath'. Hence, he said, the name 'Sarnath' for this place. Whether it was simply wishful thinking of Hindus to have the name after one of their Gods, or whether it was really true, I have absolutely no idea, and honestly, I can't think that it matters very much. After all, it is not the name which matters, or the god or the guru we believe in. it is our action that judge us, and not our beliefs. No religion teaches us to fight or kill. They all try to teach us tolerance, and that is what we ought to learn.

We were also taken to a sari shop where the weavers were Buddhists, and the proceeds were used to provide facilities for the poor. We had already bought enough saris at Varanasi, and my husband accompanied us unwillingly into the shop, but our attention was captured at once by a simple cotton sari with a motif including the word 'Sarnath' in the pattern. It was certainly unique, and we were told that saris with this pattern were only available in Buddhist shops at Sarnath. Anyway, even my husband loved them, and we ended up buying a couple more. After spending more than our budget allowed us, we traced back our steps to Varanasi, tired after spending more than 3 hours at Sarnath, filled to the brim with memories we shall treasure.



ALLAHABAD

125 Kms from Varanasi is the sacred city of Allahabad where the three greatest rivers of India meet, and continue their journey further. The Ganga weaves her way down from the Himalayas from Gangotri, passing places made sacred by her arrival, like Rishikesh and Haridwar, and passing through the industrial city of Kanpur, before arriving at Allahabad to join her sisters as she makes her way to Kashi. Yamuna also begins her journey in the Himalayas, at Yamunotri, and passes through Mathura and Brindavan, made more sacred by the association of Krishna, and finally arrives at Allahabad where she joins the Ganga to merge her identity with her. Saraswati arrives at Allahabad from god alone knows where, for she is an underground river, who remains unseen to mankind, making her presence felt at certain, extremely special places. She renders the holy Ganga and Yamuna even more pure, more sacred by her association with them at Allahabad. The place where these 3 rivers merge is the Triveni Sangam, a place where thousands and thousands congregate to pay their respects to the rivers and pray for their well being and forgiveness for their sins.



The three rivers maintain their identity and are visibly different as they merge. While the Yamuna is deep but calm and greenish in colour, the Ganga is shallow, but forceful and clear. The Saraswati remains hidden, but the faithful believe that she makes her presence felt underwater. During the monsoon, when the rivers are in full flow, the confluence of the rivers is seen clearly due to the force of the water, but the same force makes having a dip at the confluence difficult. I was told that during the monsoon, most devotees bathe at the riverbank for safety, while the more ardent ones who are willing to pay for the risk involved go to the confluence in a boat, where a shallow area is created by the presence of a number of boats with a kind of net suspended in between, and bathe there. In May however, there was enough water to bathe, but no too much, so we did not have any trouble in going to the centre of the rivers where they meet in a boat. A sort of platform had

been constructed there, from which we climbed down into waist deep water. We had a wonderful time bathing in the river. We could have stayed in the water for ages, if it hadn't been for the rites and rituals we had to perform back at the mutt where we were staying. It was a wonderful experience and I would advise people to visit Allahabad in March/April when the water will be less and the weather would be pleasant. Of course, it will be quite crowded at that time. May-end is actually a good time to visit if one wants to avoid the crowd and have fun in the water.

A number of rituals are traditionally performed at Allahabad, mainly for appeasing our ancestors. There are a number of Mutts there who perform the rites. As at Kashi, there is no standard charge, but varies according to the rites one wants to perform and the budget.

An interesting ritual performed at the Sangam is that of Veni Daanam. This is a practice followed by married women for the long life of their husbands. The husband is supposed to comb and plait the wife's hair and after decorating it with flowers, the end of the plait is cut off and offered to the rivers. Some men even shave off their hair/beard and offer it also to the rivers. This procedure is performed while travelling by boat to the Sangam and the hair is offered along with flowers, etc at the confluence. There is nothing interesting in itself about this. What is interesting is that hair, being light normally floats on water, but at this place, the hair sinks straight to the bottom. Though hundreds of people offer their hair everyday, there is not a single strand of hair seen floating on the river. Of course, there could and will be a scientific explanation for this phenomenon, but whatever it is, it gives us proof that nature is a wonderful thing….. Call it God or simply nature, it is indeed inspiring!



The temple of Veni Madhava (one of the trio along with Sethu Madhava and Bindu Madhava, as I have mentioned before) is a little way inside the city. It is a small temple, with a small idol of Vishnu representing Veni Madhava. According to the legend painted on the walls of the temple, there was once a rakshasa who troubled all the Devas. Narada sought an audience with him to find out his weakness, and found that he suffered from a skin infliction. He told

the Asura to bathe in the Triveni Sangam at Allahabad, which the Asura proceeded to do. Amazed at finding himself cured, he wanted to possess the 3 great rivers who had cured him, and began drinking them up! When the rivers pleaded with Vishnu, he arrived in the form of Veni Madhava and killed him, restoring the rivers to their rightful place.

The Shayana Anjaneya temple is an important one right on the banks of the river. Here, the idol of Hanuman is larger than life, carrying Rama and Lakshmana on his shoulders. Only, the idol is lying down. There are many stories about this temple. According to one, hanuman stepped over the rivers without their permission, angering them. They rose up and threw him to the ground, and crushed his ego. According to the locals, every year, the river rises and covers the whole idol before going back, which they consider absolute proof of this story. Another legend mentions that this is where hanuman emerged with Rama and Lakshmana after defeating the king of Patala, the netherworld, Ahi Ravana. Whatever the story, the temple is a simple and nice one.

The Adi Shankara Vimana Mandapam, a temple built by the Kanchi Mutt is right next to this temple. This is a 3 storeyed temple with idols and sculptures of various Gods and Goddesses. It is worth a visit.

The other paces of interest in Allahabad are-

THE ALLAHABAD FORT, on the banks of the Yamuna, where we take a boat to go to the Sangam.

THE BHARADVAJ ASHRAM, where Sage Bharadvaj lived

ANAND BHAVAN- the birthplace of our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

We were unable to visit these places due to lack of time. I hope to visit them when I next get the chance.

75 Kms from Allahabad is **SITA MADHI**, or Sita Samahit Sthal, where Sita is believed to have merged with mother earth. This place has recently been developed by the UP Tourism

Dept, and made into a tourist spot. There is nothing remotely religious about it now, but children seem to enjoy the attractions of the place which are a huge statue of Hanuman with an artificial cave under it, a Shiva lingam inside a cave, and the Sita temple flanked by a river on all sides, and a statue depicting Sita entering the ground.

75 Kms from here is **VINDHYACHAL,** where the temple of Vindhyavasini is one among the Shaktipeethas. We were unable to visit this temple too.

I would advise my readers to start early in the morning and visit Allahabad first. It is possible to have a dip in the river and visit all the temples, fort and other places by afternoon, if one does not have to perform all the rituals there. On the return journey, visit Sita Madhi and Vindhyachal, both of which are on the same route.





AYODHYA



Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama is bout 250 Kms from Varanasi. The river Sarayu flowing through this holy city is reason enough for a visit there. We expected the river to be dry, as it was the peak summer, but the quantity, the force and the depth of the water surprised us. Again, if time hadn't been a factor, we wouldn't have come out of the water at all. In fact, one of the best things that happened on this trip is that my son Samhith has lost his fear of water. 10 days of bathing in rivers has not only made him overcome his fear, but now he enjoys having a dip in rivers, and is proud of his 'dubki' or a full dip in the river, and actually tries to hold his breath under water!

Ayodhya is much worse than Varanasi when it comes to extortion from pilgrims in the name of religion. In fact, even though we were accompanied by a guide, the number of people who tried to get money out of us in the name of Hinduism spoilt the entire trip for us. We made the trip to the Ram Janmabhoomi, which has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. When we had got through all the tight security, and walked the long distance to what was supposedly the exact place where Rama was born, I found myself thinking, not about God, but whether all that bloodshed was really worth it. I have never been a supporter of what some call 'doing good in the name of Hindutva', and a visit to this place which has seen the governance of a king like Rama as well as destruction in His name, made me sad , to say the least.

The Hanuman Gadhi, a temple of Hanuman is the only one which shows Hanuman on a throne. It is believed that Rama asked him to rule the city when there was no ruler.

While at Ayodhya, try to stay at the Birla Dharamshala. It is an amazingly clean and nice place, and if you can get one the few AC rooms, there's nothing like it. 5 to 6 people can easily stay in one room and the experience will be like that at a 5 star hotel!

PLACES TO VISIT AROUND AYODHYA

- **CHITRAKOOT** (270Kms from Varanasi and about 150Kms from Ayodhya)– the place where Rama, Lakshmana and Sita first lived during their exile. There are a number of places of tourist and religious interest here. Not surprising, considering that Rama lived here for a number of years. Among the famous places are
  - **KAMAD GIRI**- where the mountain is believed to represent Vishnu himself
  - **HANUMAT DHARA**- where a river emerges from the gada or mace of Hanuman's idol
  - **SPATIK SHILA**- on the banks of the Mandakini, from where Rama aimed an arrow to hit a crow (who was actually Jayanta, the son of Indra) which was troubling Sita.
  - **GUPTA GODAVARI**- from where the river spring up on being hit by Rama's arrow.

- **NAIMISHARANYA** (400Kms from Varanasi and about 250 Kms from Ayodhya)- this is the sacred place where the Vedas, Puranas and Shastras were supposedly written, , and where sage Veda Vyasa recited the Vedas for the benefit of the Devas under a 5000 year old Banyan tree. The Gomati River flows here, the banks of which are covered by religious institutions from every part of India.

GAYA

Gaya is a holy place revered by Hindus and Buddhists alike. While to Hindus, it is the footprint of Vishnu (the Vishnu Padam), the Akshaya Vatam and the chance of performing the Vedic rites not just for 3 generations of ancestors, but anyone and everyone that attracts them to Gaya, for Buddhists it is the sacred Banyan tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. Indeed the regular influx of Buddhists from all over the world has made Bodh Gaya a tourist spot in Bihar, and a tourist attraction with all kind of facilities, something like an oasis in the heart of a desert! At the outset, I must mention that I will be giving only information and relevant details in this article. I will not be able to describe the places in detail, as I usually do, because this is one trip I wasn't able to make. It is a belief in our community that those whose parents are alive shouldn't visit the Vishnu Padam or the Akshaya Vatam, and my in-laws, who believe in these rules very strongly, went alone to Gaya to perform the rites, leaving us at Kashi. Hence, I have the details that I am now sharing with all of you. For a more detailed article, you will have to wait till I visit these places myself. Meanwhile read on and make a list of the places to visit, and let's hope we all get to visit Gaya sometime.

Gaya is all about legends, and there are legends connected to every temple there and every rite that is performed.

THE VISHNU PADAM AND THE LEGEND OF GAYASURAN

Let me start with the name of the place. Gaya. According to the legend, there was once an Asura named Gayasuran, who was a great devotee of Vishnu. When the Devas couldn't bear the trouble he caused any more, they went to Vishnu and asked for a way out. Vishnu approached Gayasuran and told him that He wanted to perform a special yagna, and wanted a special place to perform it. Gayasuran offered his heart, and Vishnu accepted. The yagna began, and soon, the fumes and the heat became unbearable, and Gayasuran started succumbing to it. Vishnu asked him for his final wish, and Gayasuran

asked that the place he died would be immortalized by his name, and hence the name 'Gaya'. Second, he asked that people should be allowed to perform the sacred rites (Pinda pradaanam) not only for their ancestors, but for anyone- family, distant relatives, friends and foes, non-Hindus, pets, unclaimed bodies- in short, for any dead human/creature they could think of. This remains the only place where Pinda pradaanam is carried out in this manner. In fact, I am told that in a normal Shrardham, 3 pindams are made (one for each generation which ahs passed on); in a Teertha Shrardham , as at Kashi, Allahabad, Rameswaram, etc., 16 pindams are offered, including all ancestors on both parents side; in the Gaya Shrardham, 64 pindams are offered, of which 32 are for the mother alone, since she carries her child for 9 whole months within her body, 16 for the ancestors, and 16 for all others as I have mentioned earlier. Of course, all this is a matter of faith and belief, but what is there in life if we don't have faith? Anyway, once Vishnu granted his wishes, he stepped on him with his foot, leaving a footprint at this holy place, and granting liberation to Gayasuran. It is this footprint which is worshipped as the Vishnu Padam. For the information of devotees, I must mention that for a fee of Rs.50/- an imprint of the Padam is taken on a muslin cloth and given. This is to be kept in the Puja room and is considered very auspicious.



FALGUNI RIVER AND THE LEGEND OF SITA

The next legend concerns the Falguni (or Falgu) river. There is never much water in the river at Gaya, though apparently, there is water upstream as well as downstream. It is clear that there is water under the ground, because, even as one digs into the ground with ones fingers, water appears. This is apparently because of a curse on the river. The story goes that Rama, along with his brothers and Sita, came to Gaya to perform the sacred rites for his father, Dasaratha. When the brothers were bathing in the river, Sita was sitting on the banks, playing with the sand. Suddenly, Dasaratha appeared out of the sand, and asked for the Pindam, saying he was hungry. Sita asked him to wait till his sons returned, so that she could give him the traditional Pindam of rice and til. He refused to

wait, asking her to give him pindams made of the sand in her hand. Having no other option, she gave him the Pindam he desired with five witnesses – the Akshaya Vatam, the Falguni River, a cow, a Tulsi plant and a Brahmin. Soon, Rama returned and started the rituals. In those days apparently, the ancestors would arrive in person to collect their share, and when Dasaratha did not appear, they wondered why. Sita then told them what had happened, but Rama could not believe that his father would accept pindams made of sand. Sita now mentioned her witnesses, and asked them to tell Rama the truth. Among the five, only the Akshaya Vatam took her side and told the truth, while the others lied, trying to take Rama's side. In her anger, Sita cursed all of them thus: the Falguni river henceforth would have no water at Gaya; the Cow would no longer be worshipped from the front as all others are- only its backside would be worshipped; there would be no more Tulsi plants at Gaya and the Gaya Brahmins would never be satisfied, they would always be hungry and crave more and more. She then blessed the Akshaya Vatam saying that all who came to Gaya would perform the Pinda pradaanam at the Akshaya Vatam too.

Other temples in the vicinity are the Sakshi Gopal temple and the Mangala Gowri Temple, which is among the Shakti peethams.

BODH GAYA

Bodh Gaya is about 18 Kms from Gaya. This is where Buddha came in quest of knowledge, and where he finally was enlightened. This is, truly, the birth place of Buddhism. There are, in all, seven sacred places for Buddhists, all associated with the life of Buddha. These are:

1. ***Lumbini*** – his birthplace, now in Nepal
2. ***Kapilavastu*** – his kingdom, also in Nepal
3. ***Bodh Gaya*** – where he attained enlightenment, in Bihar
4. ***Sarnath*** – where he gave his first discourse, in UP
5. ***Shravasti*** – where he taught many of his students, near Lucknow
6. ***Rajgir*** – where he loved when he fell ill, in Bihar, 80 Kms from Gaya

7. ***Kushinagar*** – where he breathed his last, in Bihar.

Buddha spent 6 weeks at Gaya. The first week he spent under the Bodhi tree, the second inside the temple, the third near a lake (it is said that when he placed a foot on the water, a lotus appeared under it), the fourth week in the area around the temple, the fifth under another Bodhi tree (which is no more- a pillar stands in its place) answering the questions of learned Brahmins, and the 6th week at the centre of the pond. It is believed that when a severe thunderstorm approached, Adisesha himself arrived to protect the Buddha, forming an umbrella over his head with his hoods. This is the reason Buddha is sometimes counted as the 9th avatar of Vishnu.



There are over 50 temples at Bodh Gaya, all built by foreign Buddhists. The most important one however, remains the Maha Bodhi Temple, where the Bodhi tree stands. This tree, though not the original one under which Buddha sat, is however, its descendant. The original tree was destroyed by the Mughals. A branch of the original tree had been taken to Sri Lanka by some Buddhist monks, and Ashoka ordered a branch of that tree to be brought and planted here. He himself took care of this tree. This second one was cut down on the orders of Ashoka's wife because she was jealous of the attention he paid to it. Nevertheless, he got a second branch from the Sri Lanka tree and planted it. This third one was destroyed during a cyclone, and another branch planted. The present tree is the 4th. It is an amazing thing that branches from the original tree flourish wherever they are planted, all over the world!

VEDIC RITES TO BE PERFORMED DURING KASHI YATRA

The purpose of a Kashi Yatra for most people is the performance of Vedic rites for their ancestors, and it was the same for us. My in-laws were performing all the rites, and we had nothing much to do. In fact, we weren't allowed to accompany them to Gaya at all, as it is apparently considered inauspicious for those whose parents were alive to see the Akshaya Vatam and the Vishnu Padam. However, my curiosity about the rituals made me ask a number of questions which were thankfully answered in detail by two young people- the manager of the Kanchi Math at Kashi and the vadhyar or pundit who officiated at our rites. Both of them were extremely helpful, and it is entirely thanks to them that I have been able to write in such detail about Kashi as well as the surrounding places, even those we did not visit. At my request, I was given this list of the rites that are traditionally performed during a Kashi Yatra. I share this with all my readers in the hope that it may be of some use to them too. I have provided contact numbers of some people there who will be able to arrange everything for anyone who desires to perform these rituals.

The Vedic rituals are begun at Allahabad. The rituals (even the more extensive ones) take about half a day (early morning to lunch), so those who wish can take in some sigh seeing at Allahabad before moving on to Kashi.

ALLAHABAD (TRIVENI SANGAM) (DAY 1)

1. Anugnai (Sankalpam)
2. Vighneshwara Puja (Prayers to Ganesha)
3. Prayschitta Sankalpam (atonement for sins committed, knowingly or unknowingly)
4. Veni Daanam (Women offer a part of their hair to the river praying for the long life of their husbands. The husband plaits the wife's hair, decorates it with flowers and cuts off the tip of the plait and offers it to the river. It is an interesting fact that while hair normally floats on water, at the Sangam; it immediately sinks to the river

bed. Though almost all married women offer their hair here, there is not a single strand found floating on the river!!!!)

5. Triveni Sangam Snanam (husband and wife bathe together at the confluence of the 3 rivers, holding hands. One has to go to the confluence in a boat. A sort of platform has been erected at the point for the convenience of pilgrims)

6. Hiranya Shrardham *

7. Pinda Pradaanam, Kshetra Pindam, Tarpanam **

The rituals at Kashi take place over two days – the first day for the Manikarnika Shrardham and the second day for the Pancha Teertha Shrardham. Then, one goes to Gaya and performs the rituals there, and returns to Kashi for the Ganga Puja, Dampati Puja and only then visits the temples at Kashi.

KASHI

DAY 2

1. Anugnai (Sankalpam)
2. Vighneshwara Puja (Prayers to Ganesha)
3. Poorvanga Godaanam ***
4. Poorvanga Dasa Daanam ***
5. Naandhi Shrardham *
6. Vaishnava Shrardham *
7. Punyaa Vajanam (purification ritual)
8. Maha Sankalpam
9. Prayschitta Sankalpam (atonement for sins committed, knowingly or unknowingly)
10. Pala Daanam ***
11. Uttaranga Godaanam ***
12. Manikarnika Teertha Shrardham (Anna roopam / Hiranya roopam)

DAY 3

13. Pancha Teertha Yatra (One has to go in a boat to these 5 Ghats and perform the rituals)

i) Asi Ghat (Haridwar Teertham) – this is where the Asi river merges with the Ganga. Performing the rites here is believed to give one the fruits of performing the rites at Haridwar.

ii) Dashashwamedha Ghat (Rudra Sarovara Teertham) – this is the place where Brahma performed 10 Ashwamedha Yagnas, and hence it is considered sacred to perform the rites.

iii) Trilochana Ghat (Vishnu Paada Udaka Teertham)

iv) Pancha Ganga Ghat (Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Kirana, Doodhapappa- Sangam); Bindu Madhava Temple

v) Manikarnika Ghat (Manikarnika Teertham, Chakra Pushkarni Teertham)

DAY 5

14. Ganga Puja (it is a tradition to bring back small sealed containers of water from the Ganges and distribute it among our near and dear ones. One container is kept at home as it is considered sacred and one is taken to Rameswaram where it is used to perform Abhishekam to the lingam. All these containers are kept and prayed to before they are distributed.)

15. Dampati Puja (Prayers offered to an elderly married couple, invoking them as Vishwanath and Annapurna)

16. Uttaranga Dasa Daanam ***

17. Kala Bhairava Samaradhana (invocation and prayers to Kala Bhairav)

It is advisable to make a day trip to Gaya from Varanasi. The journey takes about 3 hours, and the roads are extremely good. The general practice is to take a car to Gaya on the evening of the Pancha Teertha Shrardham at Kashi and stay overnight at the Mutt at Gaya. The rituals at Gaya are completed by lunchtime, and one can return to Kashi by evening.

GAYA SHRARDHAM (DAY 4)

1. Palguni (Falguni) Teertha Hiranya Shrardham (this is the traditional Shrardham performed on the banks of any sacred river, here the Falguni.)
2. Vishnu Paada Hiranya Shrardham †
3. Akshaya Vata Anna/Hiranya Shrardham †
4. Akshaya Vata Pinda Pradaanam ** †
5. Ask Gaya Brahmans if they are satisfied (according to legend, the Brahmins at Gaya are not easily satisfied and it is a tradition to ask them anyway in an attempt to satisfy them)

Acharya sambhavana (payment of the fees to the pundit)

Explanations:

* *Shrardham* or performing the Vedic rites to appease one's forefathers is of two types- Anna roopam and Hiranya roopam. Anna Shrardham is where a certain number of Brahmins are invited, and are fed at the completion of the rituals. This is considered equivalent to feeding one's ancestors. However, this is quite tedious, and sometimes expensive. Hence the second option, Hiranya Shrardham, where the Brahmins are fed only symbolically. This is a quicker and cheaper alternative to the same rituals. At places like Kashi the pundits offer us the option of choosing which kind of ritual we would like to perform, depending on our time and budget.

Naandhi and *Vaishnava Shrardham* refer to the rites for appeasement of one's ancestors and the Gods, respectively.

** *Pinda pradaanam* is the ritual of offering food to three (in case of Gaya, more than that) generations of our ancestors. Balls of cooked rice and Til (sesame seeds), which are thus offered are called the pindams.

*** *Daanam* - Strictly meaning Charity, Daanam refers to the procedure of donating things to the Brahmins in the name of our ancestors. There is a long list of things that need to be given, starting from simple things like umbrellas, fans, and mats to more expensive things made of silver and gold. Among the more auspicious ones is the donation

of a cow (*Godaanam*) and land, both of which are usually done in symbolic terms. *Poorvanga and Uttaranga Daanam* refer to the things needed to be given at the beginning and end of the rituals respectively, while *Dasa Daanam* refers to a set of 10 things that need to be donated.

† The *Akshaya Vata* and the *Vishnu Pada* are the only two places where one can perform the Vedic rites not only for our forefathers, but for anyone, family, friends, acquaintances, whatever caste, religion or community they may belong to… and also for animals, our pets, abandoned bodies, etc.. This is the uniqueness of Gaya which draws thousands of people from all parts of India.

FOR PERFORMING VEDIC RITES, CONTACT -----

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-----------------------------------The End----------------------------------